

The Magic of Movement:

Using Targeted Exercise to Improve Focus, Decrease Anxiety, and Fight Depression

By Rose Hylton, PA-C, LMFT

If you want to improve your focus and be mentally well, movement is key. As a psychiatric provider, I may surprise patients when I focus on exercise and physical health. Or perhaps it brings up the thought, “Sure, sure we all know exercise is important, but who has the time?” I believe it is important to advocate for realistic increases to physical activity to improve your specific mental health needs.

BENEFITS OF MOVEMENT

Moving our bodies provides significant and meaningful mental health benefits. Regular exercise is associated with everything from improved sleep to reduced rates of anxiety and depression.¹

On the other hand, exercise recommendations are often overwhelming. Visions of marathon runners or professional athletes can intimidate us into not getting started. Please understand: any step you take counts and may have a greater impact on your overall health than you realize. In fact, individuals who engage in as little as one or two 75-minute sessions of exercise per week appear to have decreased risk of mortality.² Furthermore, small changes will benefit your mental well-being.

The following are pieces of advice I offer my patients on targeted exercises to improve their focus, decrease anxiety, and fight



depression. It should be noted that these are not substitutes for medication or psychotherapy. Seek a psychiatric evaluation if you think you are struggling with a condition.

ADHD:

Cardiovascular exercises, interval training, group aerobics: Attention deficits can be attributed to low activity in brain circuits involving dopamine and norepinephrine. Regular, high energy exercises like running, swimming, cycling, interval training, step aerobics, and Zumba/dance aerobics are examples of ways to increase release of these neurochemicals. If you want to modify or build up to this type of exercise, start with a brisk walk to build focusing power.

Exercise breaks are a great way to refocus during the day—do some jumping jacks, push-ups, jog in place, or stand and stretch in between meetings or assignments.

ANXIETY/STRESS:

Yoga: For anxiety, I highly recommend mindfulness practices. Anxiety usually involves ruminating

about regrets or resentments or worrying about the uncertainty of the future. Utilize mindfulness practices to ground you in the here and now.

Yoga is great for anxiety because mindfulness is embedded in the practice of yoga. Start with watching videos of yoga for beginners or sign up for a local or online class.

DEPRESSION:

Whole body, balance cardio and strength training, and build accountability: One aspect of the prevailing understanding of depression is that decreased activity between connections in the brain keeps us in a depressed state of mind. Standard treatment options aim to “wake up” those underactive connections by modifying serotonin, norepinephrine, and/or dopamine.

Depression can be especially difficult to modify with exercise because it often comes with loss of motivation. Therefore, building accountability is essential in improving low mood with exercise. Agree to start exercising with a friend who will hold you to your meetings, join a class, or, if you have the resources, invest in personal training sessions. Do whatever you need to do to *start moving*.

A final note: Although these approaches are personalized for individual concerns, a combined approach is likely to be the most beneficial. Start with the exercises that are most likely to benefit you but aim to build a

comprehensive practice. Talk to your primary care provider about individual risks/benefits of exercise regimens based on your overall physical health. **h&h**

1. Piery KL, Troiano RP, Ballard RM, Carlson SA, Fulton JE, Galuska DA, George SM, Olson RD. *The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. JAMA. 2018 Nov 20;320(19):2020-2028. doi: 10.1001/jama.2018.14854. PMID: 30418471.

2. O'Donovan G, Lee IM, Hamer M, Stamatakis E. Association of “Weekend Warrior” and Other Leisure Time Physical Activity Patterns With Risks for All-Cause, Cardiovascular Disease, and Cancer Mortality. JAMA Intern Med. 2017 Mar 1;177(3):335-342. doi: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2016.8014. PMID: 28097313.

Rose Hylton became a MindPath Care Centers provider because she loves people and the dynamics of relationships. With a passion for evidence-based medicine, she consistently works to deepen her understanding about the connections between mental and physical well-being to provide her patients with the most up-to-date and efficient care. Emphasizing a non-judgmental, helpful approach, her objective is to support people in identifying their strengths, noticing patterns within their own thoughts and behaviors, and making changes that support growth in their life.

For more information, contact
MINDPATH CARE CENTERS
<https://www.mindpathcare.com/rose-hylton-lmft>